KEEP YOUR QUESTION MARKS HANDY:
KNOWING WHAT WE DON'T KNOW
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Exodus 33:17–23
Luke 9: 28-36

"Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back;
but my face shall not be seen."
Exodus 33:23 (NRSV)

It is a great honor to be here this morning in this historic place that means so much to our nation and our civilization.

This church, and its distinguished minister, represent for many of us the important dialogue between faith and reason, religion and academic sciences, the social and physical. The very existence of this church here represents, for many of us, the provocative notion that faith and reason are not only not exclusive avenues in the search for truth, but need each other. So it is an honor to be here.

I'm indebted – as we all are to Peter Gomes for his faithful and eloquent and consistent articulation of the Christian Gospel, from this pulpit, his books and his lecturing and speaking.

Peter did us the honor of delivering the annual Christian Century lecture in Chicago several years ago – at which time he also preached from the pulpit of Fourth Presbyterian Church. As you might expect, it was superb and I am grateful to him for coming, and for the gift of his friendship.

Dear God, we come here this morning to be with you,
to sit together in your presence,
and to listen together for the word you have for us.
We are here to begin together our Lenten journey,
walking with your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, on the way to his cross.
Bless us. Silence in us any voice but your own and help us to know again
the power of your redeeming love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leszek Pytka, our building manager, a Polish school teacher who found his way to Chicago years ago, applied for a custodial job – the same week I arrived – and is now the only truly indispensible person on the staff of Fourth Presbyterian Church, said that, “We have no question marks.” I had decided to preach about the question that recurs every time there is a natural disaster, Katrina, Tsunami, the devastating earthquake in Haiti. “Where was God?” Every time there is a natural disaster the question is all over the media. Reporters call theologians, philosophers, clergy for statements, some of which can be pretty appalling – silly, even like Pat Robinson blaming the Haiti earthquake on a pact Haitians made with the devil… So because everyone was asking the question and proposing answers I decided to do a sermon on the topic and I decided to do something we do not ordinarily do, namely put the sermon title on the bulletin boards outside: “Where Is God When Disaster Strikes?” Walking past the church, however, I noticed that the question mark was missing. Not wanting to be guilty of a punctuation faux pas in such a public way, I contacted Leszek, who is responsible for a 100 year old Gothic church in the middle of Chicago and keeping the board outside (the menu board) up to date, and suggested that the title needed a question mark. That is when Leszek Pytka came to my study, stuck his head in the door, and told me he knew about proper English punctuation but, “Dr. Buchanan, I am sorry but we have no question marks.” Apparently our set of little white letters that provides bulletin board information doesn’t include question marks. But Leszek understood and told me he would fix it, and did, by somehow making a perfectly adequate question mark. And I thought, in the process gave me a title for a future sermon.

Wouldn’t it be nice if it were that simple—life with no question marks, life lived securely within an envelope of absolute certainty? We begin life that way, with certainty given to us, by benevolent, loving parents. For a while, at least, God is in heaven and all is right with the world, and it has been suggested that longing for that certainty, the security of life without question marks, is with us as long as we live. It is further suggested that when we live in uncertain, dangerous, unpredictable times, religion is one of the places we look for that lost certainty. And so, not surprisingly, religion often speaks and acts as if it knows the truth, not one central fundamental truth, but a lot of little truths, with an authoritarian aura of absolute certainty. And that is precisely when things start to go wrong. Scott Roeder was told over and over that it is an absolute, uncompromised truth that abortion is murder, and so armed with absolute truth and a hand

gun, he followed Dr. George Tiller to his church one Sunday morning and killed him.

A friend of mine, professor Anna Case Winters, who teaches theology at McCormick Seminary, tells about a conversation she had with an official from the World Bank. The woman was organizing a World Bank dialogue on ethics and values and wanted to invite religious leaders to participate. She was overruled. She was told by her superiors that religious leaders would not be helpful. Religion is defunct and "where religion still has influence it is divisive and even dangerous." Unfortunately, Professor Winters concludes, "these charges are not without foundation. . . . Jonathan Swift's acid observation is to the point: 'We have just enough religion to make us hate one another—but not enough to make us love one another'" (Anna Case Winters, *God Alone Is God).*

Now it is terribly easy here to be critical of others, to point accusative fingers at people whose theology and ecclesiology are different from ours, those people who are so sure of themselves, and to wrap ourselves round with the mantle of liberality and open-mindedness. So let me be clear at the outset: the temptation to embrace our own certainties and to live life without question marks falls equally on all of us—liberals and conservatives; mainliners and evangelicals; Protestants and Catholics; Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

So, back to a basic question: How do we know truth? How do we know what we know? The name for it is epistemology, the study of the nature and limits of human knowledge. *Epistemology:* one of those wonderful words you learn in divinity school and never get to use again, particularly not in sermons—but surely I can get away with at Harvard. How do we know what we know? It's an important question. For several centuries we Westerners, children of the Enlightenment, have placed our bets on human reason. It is true if you can see it, touch, feel, smell, weigh, analyze it. Human reason, common sense, defines truth. Truth is H_20, which is always water. Truth, someone said, is a Concert A, which is the same, always and everywhere. But science itself is now questioning the certainty that derives from reason alone. Maybe there is another way of knowing that is not contrary to human reason but above, beyond, below, deeper than or at least different from, and complementary to, reason alone.

Poets, artists, know about this knowing, this way of knowing that might be called the truth of the heart. Krista Tippet, host of the popular NPR program, Speaking of Faith, was interviewing John Polkinghorn, a very distinguished mathematical physicist, also Anglican priest. The topic was religion and science and the nature of truth. "A scientist," Polkinhorn said, "can analyze a painting and identify and describe the chemical composition of the paint, and quite miss the truth of the painting – in fact, probably destroy it – in the process."

The culprit here, of course, is our tendency to be absolutely sure we know the truth.

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, at a briefing a few months after 9/11, attempted to get at it, and in the process earned some good-natured ribbing, even including a parody in a poetry journal. But what he said is important.

> There are known knowns,
> things we know we know.
> There are known unknowns,
> that is, we know there are some things we do not know.
> But there are also unknown unknowns,
> The ones we don't know
> We don't know."
> (DOD Briefing, 2/12/02)

When the topic is military intelligence and national security, it is absolutely essential to know that there are things you do not know. Secretary Rumsfeld was absolutely on target. He was also being a good philosophic theologian.

In an article she wrote for the *Christian Century*, Barbara Brown Taylor introduced me to an obscure theologian who lived five centuries ago, Nicholas of Cusa, whose big contribution to theology was the notion he called "Learned Ignorance."

Nicholas of Cusa wrote, "God is the unknown infinite who dwells in light inaccessible and so God's greatest gift to us is 'to know that we do not know.' Nothing more perfect comes to a person," he said.

Barbara Brown Taylor concludes,

> In Nicholas's scheme, the dumbest people in the world are those who think they know. Their certainty about what is true not only pits them against each other, it also prevents them from learning anything new. That is truly dangerous knowledge. They do not know that they do not know and their unlearned ignorance keeps them in the dark about most of the things that matter. . . . To know that you do not know is the beginning of wisdom." (*The Christian Century*, 1 June 2001)

Wouldn't it be something if religious leaders everywhere joined hands in a confession of learned ignorance, a humble, graceful act of theological modesty before the infinite mystery that is God— if popes, Dalai Lamas, chief rabbis, televangelists, imams, archbishops, moderators, district superintendents, bishops joined hands and promised to reexamine their certainties about those exclusive truth claims that divide us and sometimes turn violent? Wouldn't it be something to see, if Christians stopped using their truth as a weapon against other Christians? Wouldn't it be something to see, if we Christians stopped saying, "Thus saith the Lord" and instead learned to say "It is our opinion that . . ."? Wouldn't it be something if just the world's Christians let go of certainty about the mind of God on a whole myriad of issues like gay marriage, gay/lesbian ordination, abortion, stem cell research—all of the issues that divide us—and simply learned to say—instead of "we know"—"we think," "it is our considered opinion that," "we suggest for your consideration"?

It's there deep in our faith tradition, an intentional modesty before the mystery of God, a clear confession that we know what we do not know. After leading God's people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea and into the wilderness Moses is up in top of Mt. Sinai. God gives Moses the Ten Commandments – then comes the Golden Calf the people are worshipping while Moses in on the mountain with God. Moses smashes the stone tablets – and now he's back up on the mountain with God. And at this very moment Moses makes a perfectly reasonable request, show me your glory: "show me the money". This is getting a little tricky so: "A little concrete evidence please? A little confirmation that I'm on the right track here, that all this is not a figment of my imagination. Help me to know for sure that you are for real and not, as some have suggested, a projection of my own fears and insecurities."

A voice from the cloud says, “I will make my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name, but you cannot see my face.”

There are some things Moses, you, cannot know. As St. Augustine would later observe: “If you understand, it is not God.”

And then, in this ancient and wonderful and profound story, God says the most amazing thing to Moses: “There is a place by me where you can stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft in the rock and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

It is such a reasonable request, such a familiar question: just a little empirical evidence, just a little something to hold on to, to assure me that this is true and that I’m not making a complete fool of myself by believing in you and trusting you as I walk into this wilderness, just some proof that I’m not wasting my time trying to be faithful to you, that I’m not being naïve trying to be honest and fair and loving and genuine. It is such a familiar request. All we want, after all, is a little certainty.

It’s transfiguration Sunday: the Sunday when Christians all over the world think about another mystical moment of truth on the mountaintop. For a moment at least, Jesus disciples understand the truth about Jesus. His face shines, Peter tries to nail it down to make it logical, tangible. “Let’s build,” he says. “Let’s fabricate a monument to preserve the truth of this amazing moment.” It didn’t happen. Instead, a cloud enveloped them and there was a voice – “This is my Son, the Chosen: listen to him.” And then nothing. Just Jesus standing there and the wind blowing.

Apparently what God has in mind, what God wants, is not certainty but faith, life lived not on the basis of a list of absolutely true maxims or rules that keep getting us into trouble and starting fights about whose truth is the real truth, but a life of faithful trusting, a life of prayerful inquiry, a lifelong quest for truth that will never be complete until that day when we no longer see through a glass, dimly, but face to face. Maybe God wants us to keep our question marks handy.

Lent, next week, a journey following Jesus to the cross. Near the end of the story, Jesus has been arrested by the Romans, put on trial, convicted of blasphemy and now is being questioned by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who will decide his fate.

It is a great and haunting dialogue. "Are you a king?" Pilate asks, and Jesus answers: "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

And Pilate asks: "What is truth?"

It is the best question in all of history. It is the question that lies beneath the human phenomenon of religion, and beneath the faith journey of every single one of us, regardless of where we are on it or how we express it.

The great theologian Paul Tillich, who taught here before he saw the light and came to the University of Chicago, said that the search for truth is deep within every one of us, a lifelong quest for something to hold on to and live by.

Tillich said:

> "In the depth of every serious doubt and every despair of truth, the passion for truth is still at work. Don't give in too quickly to those who want to alleviate your anxiety about truth." (*The New Being: What Is Truth?*, p. 67)

What Christianity offers is this: That man, Jesus, not words about him, not doctrines that attempt to explain him, not churches that use his name, not ecclesiastical authorities that claim to speak and act for him, but him. He, himself, is truth.

What does that mean? Paul Tillich said. "If Jesus says, 'I am the truth,' he indicates that in him, the true, the genuine, the ultimate reality is present; or in other words, that God is present, unveiled, understood, in his infinite depth" (Ibid., p. 69).

At the end, Jesus is our truth. And if we hold to him, if we listen to him because he is truth, as the voice on the mountain commanded, we will not use our religion to exclude others, because he did not. Because he is our

truth, we will never use our religion to judge others, because he did not. Because he is the truth, we will do everything we can to forgive and accept and extend compassion to our neighbors, because he did and because he told us to. Because he is the truth, we can never arrogantly claim that our truth is the whole truth, the only truth, because he did not.

Jesus is our truth and we follow him "by faith and not by sight," the Bible says.

There is truth that we know more deeply than our minds, our reason. It is truth of the heart, what poet Wendell Berry calls "knowing by cherishing, . . . knowing by affection, knowing by heart." The best part of life is like that. You can't, after all, understand love with your mind alone. You can't reduce your love for another—for your spouse, your beloved, your children, your parents—to a formula. For Valentine's Day I didn't leave my wife a list of logical reasons why I love her – I bought a mushy Valentine's card with two little hummingbirds sitting on a nest surrounded by hearts and flowers. You can't understand the love for country, for buddies that motivates a young Marine in Afghanistan to cover a grenade with his body and save the lives of his friends. I'd be hard pressed to prove the dearest, most precious, most cherished parts of my life. But I'm willing to bet my life on them.

You know love, Wendell Berry said, by remembering and cherishing and by the singing that is in your heart.

Lent begins this week and we will follow one on a journey of the heart. He, who is our truth, set aside reason and listened to his heart. It was not reasonable to leave Galilee and go to Jerusalem. It was not good common sense to expose himself to danger. It was not rational to go to the very place where he could be arrested and tried and crucified.

But that is what he did—set aside reason and listened to his heart, and acted in the purity and wholeness and passion of his love.

And that is how he summons you to live your life and me to live my life.

I loved learning that *credo*, the Latin word from which we get "creed," actually comes from the Latin word for heart, *corda.* So when we say I believe—"I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord," we are not saying that we know this in our minds, that we

know the absolute truth of these ten sentences, about how we are saying that we know him in our hearts, but in where we know the truth of love. To say “I believe” is not to say “I know” in the same way that “I know this is Sunday and the sandwich is chicken salad and the hymnbook I am holding has 716 pages.” No, it is to say, I turn my heart to God and to God’s Son Jesus Christ. I give my heart to this one.

We believe, we trust, Jesus Christ, is truth, and until that day when we see clearly, to know him is to know the truth in which there is perfect freedom and wholeness and, abundant life, at the end, Homecoming.

All praise to him.

Amen.